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Description and Employment Criteria of Instructional Paraprofessionals

Most public elementary and secondary schools have “instructional paraprofessionals” who are support staff responsible for assisting in the delivery of instruction.¹ Instructional paraprofessionals account for about 12 percent of full-time or its equivalent staff in these schools while teachers make up about half of such staff (Hoffman and Sable 2006). However, little is known about the assignments of these paraprofessionals and the educational qualifications that they are required to have in order to work in an instructional capacity. This Issue Brief (1) offers a descriptive portrait of the distribution of instructional paraprofessionals in all public elementary and secondary schools by instructional responsibility and selected school characteristics and (2) examines the educational attainment criteria used by school districts in hiring these paraprofessionals.

Data for this analysis were drawn from the 2003–04 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), conducted by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Data from the SASS school questionnaire were used to examine how many staff held full-time, part-time, or other assignments for various categories of instructional paraprofessionals, including special education, regular Title I, English as a Second Language (ESL)/bilingual, library/media center, and other instructional paraprofessionals. Previous research has shown that the percentage, number, and availability of full- and part-time instructional paraprofessionals vary by school level and school poverty status (Wirt et al. 2004, indicator 28). Therefore, findings are also shown by these and other school characteristics.²

Data from the SASS school district questionnaire were used to examine the criteria used in hiring instructional paraprofessionals. On the questionnaire, school districts were asked if they hire paraprofessionals to provide instructional support and, if so, what educational qualification criteria they use in considering applicants.³ The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (P.L. 107-110) now requires all instructional paraprofessionals employed in Title I programs to have earned at least a high school diploma. This legislation also requires new Title I paraprofessionals hired after its enactment to have either completed 2 years of study at an institution of higher education, received an associate’s degree or higher degree, or passed a rigorous local or state assessment. Therefore, in this Issue Brief, findings regarding hiring practices are compared by Title I status.

Distribution of Instructional Paraprofessionals by Instructional Responsibility and School Characteristics

Ninety-one percent of public elementary and secondary schools in 2003–04 had instructional paraprofessionals, with an average of eight per school. The majority of the 634,000 instructional paraprofessionals in these schools were employed full time (75 percent) (table 1).

Differences by instructional responsibility. Public elementary and secondary schools were more likely to report having special education paraprofessionals (76 percent) than other instructional (42 percent), library/media center (38 percent), regular Title I (36 percent), and ESL/bilingual (31 percent) paraprofessionals (table 1). Among schools with instructional paraprofessionals, they reported having more special education paraprofessionals (five), on average, than other instructional (four), regular Title I (three), ESL/bilingual (two), and library/media center (one) paraprofessionals. In addition, the average number of teachers per special education instructional paraprofessional was smaller (nine teachers per paraprofessional) than for other instructional (10), regular Title I (11), ESL/bilingual (23), and library/media center (36) paraprofessionals. Furthermore, special education paraprofessionals were more likely to work full time (80 percent) than other instructional (74 percent), regular Title I (69 percent), library/media center (68 percent), and ESL/bilingual (58 percent) paraprofessionals.

Differences by school characteristics. The percentage of schools with instructional paraprofessionals, the average number of instructional paraprofessionals per school, and the percentage of instructional paraprofessionals who were full-time varied by school classification, school level, and student enrollment.⁴ A greater percentage of traditional public schools than charter schools reported having instructional paraprofessionals (91 vs. 74 percent) (table 2). Similarly, elementary schools were more likely than secondary schools to report having instructional paraprofessionals (94 vs. 82 percent). Also, schools with student enrollments of 300–699 and 700 or more were more likely to report having instructional paraprofessionals (94 percent each) than were small public schools—those with less than 300 students (82 percent).

Among schools with instructional paraprofessionals, traditional public schools reported having more instructional paraprofessionals per school, on average, than did charter schools (eight vs. six), and elementary schools reported having more instructional paraprofessionals per school than did secondary schools (eight vs. seven). Differences in the average total number of instructional paraprofessionals per school were also found by student enrollment. Public schools with student enrollments of 300–699 and 700 or more had, on average, a greater number of instructional paraprofessionals (eight and ten, respectively) than did public schools with less than 300 students (five).

Traditional public schools had a greater percentage of full-time instructional paraprofessionals than did charter schools (75 vs. 65 percent). Among schools with instructional paraprofessionals, secondary schools had a greater percentage of full-time instructional paraprofessionals than did elementary schools (81 vs. 73 percent). In addition, 78 percent of schools

Table 1. Instructional paraprofessionals in public elementary and secondary schools, by instructional responsibility: 2003–04

Instructional responsibility	Total ²	In schools with instructional paraprofessionals ¹			Percentage full-time
		Percentage of schools with instructional paraprofessionals ³	Average number per school ³	Average number of teachers per instructional paraprofessional ³	
All instructional paraprofessionals	633,671	90.6	7.9	4.8	74.5
Special education	311,908	76.3	4.6	8.5	80.0
Regular Title I	94,934	35.5	3.0	11.2	68.7
ESL/bilingual	51,346	31.2	1.9	23.1	57.6
Library/media center	38,611	38.4	1.1	35.5	67.7
Other instructional	136,871	41.8	3.7	9.8	74.0

¹ Estimates are calculated only for schools with instructional paraprofessionals. Estimates by type of instructional paraprofessionals are calculated only for schools with those instructional paraprofessionals.

² Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

³ Does not distinguish between full- and part-time status of staff.

NOTE: Standard errors are available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2007008>.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public School Questionnaire," 2003–04.

Table 2. Instructional paraprofessionals in public elementary and secondary schools, by school characteristics: 2003–04

School characteristics	In schools with instructional paraprofessionals ¹			Percentage full-time
	Percentage of schools with instructional paraprofessionals ²	Average number per school ²	Average number of teachers per instructional paraprofessional ²	
Total	90.6	7.9	4.8	74.5
School classification				
Traditional public school	91.0	8.0	4.8	74.6
Charter school	74.1	6.4	3.4	65.0
School level				
Elementary	94.2	8.5	4.1	72.5
Secondary	81.6	6.6	8.2	81.1
Combined	84.5	6.4	4.1	82.1
Student enrollment				
1–299	82.1	5.1	3.3	72.6
300–699	94.2	8.2	4.2	72.6
700 or more	93.9	10.4	6.5	78.4
Percent minority				
Less than 10 percent	89.1	6.8	4.9	74.5
From 10 to 34 percent	90.9	8.0	4.9	70.0
35 percent or more	91.5	8.7	4.6	77.1
Percent of students in school approved for free or reduced-price lunch				
0–20	87.0	7.5	5.7	70.7
21–50	92.8	7.7	4.8	73.1
51–100	91.1	8.4	4.2	77.8
Community type				
Central city	92.3	8.6	5.0	76.1
Urban fringe/large town	90.5	8.3	4.9	71.5
Rural/small town	89.2	6.6	4.3	79.2
Region				
Northeast	89.3	8.8	5.2	79.8
Midwest	89.9	6.7	4.9	76.5
South	91.6	7.7	5.5	90.9
West	90.8	9.2	3.6	48.2

¹ Estimates are calculated only for schools with instructional paraprofessionals.

² Does not distinguish between full- and part-time status of staff.

NOTE: Standard errors are available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2007008>.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public School Questionnaire," 2003–04.

with 700 or more students had full-time instructional paraprofessionals compared to 73 percent of schools with less than 300 students.

Differences were also found by other school characteristics for schools that reported having instructional paraprofessionals.

For example, on average, schools with minority enrollments of 35 percent or more had 9 instructional paraprofessionals per school, but schools with minority enrollments of less than 35 percent had between 7 and 8 instructional paraprofessionals per school. In addition, schools in which 51 percent or more of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch had a greater percentage of full-time instructional paraprofessionals than did schools in which 20 percent or less of the students were eligible (78 vs. 71 percent).

Of schools that reported having instructional paraprofessionals, those located in rural areas and small towns had fewer instructional paraprofessionals per school (seven) than did schools located in central cities (nine) or large towns (eight). In terms of region, schools in the South reported a greater percentage of full-time instructional paraprofessionals than did schools in the other regions of the country. Ninety-one percent of instructional paraprofessionals in the South were full-time staff, compared to 80 percent in the Northeast, 77 percent in the Midwest, and 48 percent in the West.

Criteria Used to Hire Instructional Paraprofessionals

In addition to the distribution of instructional paraprofessionals, this Issue Brief also examines the educational qualification criteria used by school districts when hiring paraprofessionals. School districts could report that, when hiring instructional paraprofessionals, they either required, used but did not require, or did not use any of the following educational qualification criteria: (1) a high school diploma or the equivalent, (2) at least 2 years of college, (3) an associate's or higher degree, or (4) passage of a state or local test.

In 2003–04, of all schools in districts that hired instructional paraprofessionals, 93 percent required these staff to have a high school diploma or the equivalent; 39 percent required at least 2 years of college, 18 percent required an associate's or higher degree, and 37 percent required the passage of a state or local test (table 3). Some districts reported that they used the educational qualification criteria even though the criteria were not required. A high school diploma or its equivalent was used but not required by 5 percent of schools. Fifty-one percent of schools used but did not require the completion of at least 2 years of college, 67 percent used but did not require an associate's degree, and 28 percent used but did not require the passage of a state or local test.

Differences were found by Title I status. For example, Title I schools were more likely than non-Title I schools to be in districts that required instructional paraprofessionals to have a high school diploma or its equivalent (94 vs. 92 percent). In addition, a greater percentage of Title I schools than non-Title I schools required instructional paraprofessionals to have at least one of the education qualifications beyond a high school diploma or the equivalent (60 vs. 52 percent).

A greater percentage of both Title I and non-Title I schools were in districts that required the completion of at least 2 years of college or the passage of a state or local test than an associate's degree or higher. For example, 41 percent of Title I schools were in districts that required the completion of 2 years of college compared to 20 percent of Title I schools that were in districts that required an associate's degree or higher.

Summary

Ninety-one percent of public elementary and secondary schools in the United States had at least one instructional paraprofessional on staff in 2003–04. Of these 634,000 staff who provided instructional support, about half (312,000) were employed as special education paraprofessionals. On average, each school had 5 special education instructional paraprofessionals, of whom 80 percent were employed full time.

The analysis also found that a greater percentage of traditional public schools than charter schools had instructional paraprofessionals. Similarly, a greater percentage of elementary schools than secondary schools report having instructional paraprofessionals. In addition, among schools with instructional paraprofessionals, elementary schools averaged more instructional paraprofessionals than did secondary schools (eight vs. seven). However, instructional paraprofessionals in elementary schools were less likely than their counterparts in secondary schools to be employed full time (73 vs. 81 percent).

The analysis also examined the educational qualification criteria that school districts used when hiring instructional paraprofessionals. Overall, 93 percent of schools were in districts that required paraprofessionals to have a high school diploma or the equivalent. The results also indicate that a greater percentage of Title I schools than non-Title I schools were in districts that required instructional paraprofessionals

Table 3. Percentage of schools with districts that reported hiring paraprofessionals and used or required educational qualification hiring criteria when considering applicants for instructional paraprofessional staff, by Title I status: 2003–04

School characteristic	Educational qualification criteria used or required in school district									
	High school diploma or equivalent		Beyond high school diploma or equivalent							
	Used but not required	Required	Required at least one of the educational qualifications beyond high school diploma or equivalent	Completion of at least two years of college	Associate's degree or higher	Passage of a state or local test	Used but not required	Required	Used but not required	Required
All schools	5.0	92.9	56.5	51.1	39.0	67.4	17.9	27.7	36.7	36.7
Title I schools ¹	4.5	93.7	59.9	49.4	41.3	66.5	19.9	26.2	40.0	40.0
Non-Title I schools	5.6	91.9	52.2	53.2	36.1	68.5	15.4	29.5	32.5	32.5

¹ Title I is a federally funded program that provides educational services, such as remedial reading or remedial math, to children who live in areas with high concentrations of low-income families.
 NOTE: Standard errors are available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2007008>.
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public School Questionnaire," 2003–04.

to have a high school diploma or the equivalent. Furthermore, Title I schools were more likely than non-Title I schools to be in districts that required instructional paraprofessionals to have at least 2 years of college, an associate's degree or higher degree, and/or the passage of a state or local test.

References

- Hoffman, L., and Sable, J. (2006). *Public Elementary and Secondary Students, Staff, Schools, and School Districts: School Year 2003–04* (NCES 2006-307). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- Wirt, J., Choy, S.P., Rooney, P., Provasnik, S., Sen, A., and Tobin, R. (2004). *The Condition of Education 2004* (NCES 2004-077). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Endnotes

- ¹ Paraprofessionals who provide noninstructional or clerical support are not included in this analysis. Terms used besides instructional paraprofessional include teacher aide, paraeducator, and teacher assistant.
- ² The sample for the first part of the analysis (tables 1 and 2) includes 7,991 schools. The analysis was weighted using the public school weight (SFNLWGT).
- ³ All the estimates based on the school district questionnaire (table 3) are presented at the school level and not at the district level. The sample for this part of the analysis includes 6,146 schools. Of these 6,146 schools, 1,221 schools (16 percent) were in districts that did not complete the district questionnaire. Additionally, 624 schools were in districts that did not hire paraprofessionals for providing instructional support. These schools were excluded from the sample. The analysis was weighted using the public school weight (SFNLWGT).
- ⁴ It is important to note that many of the school characteristics used for independent analysis may also be related to each other. However, this Issue Brief focuses on the bivariate relationships between the school characteristics and the data gathered in the survey, rather than more complex analyses, to provide descriptive information on the distribution of instructional paraprofessionals in public schools.

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